



THINK ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8

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SANCTUARY CHURCHES

By AL DIESTELKAMP

A relatively new phenomenon in our nation is the emergence of what are known as “sanctuary cities” in which people who have committed certain federal crimes are immune to deportation. Needless to say, this has created great controversy among the citizens of our nation. Unfortunately, a similar problem exists among our brethren regarding corrective church discipline.

Corrective discipline is neglected in many congregations. We ought to ask ourselves how it happens that churches which are known for going “by the Book” are able to ignore the command to “withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly” (2 Thess. 3:6). We might be tempted to blame it on influence from the permissive attitude in our current culture that values “tolerance” over truth. While that may make matters worse, the problem has been around far too long for that to be the real answer. I suspect one of the main deterrents to corrective church discipline is the fact that almost everyone has close family members or friends who have become unfaithful and many are unwilling to obey the apostle’s command to “not keep company” with them (i.e., 2 Thess. 12:14-15).

If my suspicion is accurate, we should be reminded of what Jesus said about familial relations taking priority over Him: “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matt. 10:37).

Another deterrent to church discipline is the unpleasant nature of it. Even the Scriptures testify that “no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous...” (Heb. 12:11a). This truth is in the context of respecting the discipline of the Lord, illustrated by discipline fathers administer to their children (vv.5-10). The lack of joy

is not only for the one receiving discipline but also for the ones administering it. However, whether it is the Lord’s discipline, a father’s discipline, or a church’s discipline, “nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (v.11b).

Even if a congregation is faithful in disciplining one who continues in sin, he is likely to simply seek out another congregation which will accept him with no questions asked. This diminishes the effectiveness of the chastening. Of course, a congregation has an obligation to determine whether any previous withdrawal was justified, but too often no effort is made in this regard. The desire for greater numbers causes many brethren to adopt the “I know nothing” approach. Some express the fear that any inquiry would be a violation of local autonomy while others simply don’t believe in corrective church discipline except in extreme situations.

Though no congregation would likely admit it has become a “sanctuary church,” there is no doubt that there are churches which are known for harboring those from whom other brethren have had to withdraw themselves. Sometimes they are even willing to accept some whom we are commanded to “deliver unto Satan” (1 Cor. 5:4-5).

The existence of “sanctuary churches” has made it possible for backsliding members of faithful churches to employ a clever scheme to avoid any effective corrective discipline. What they do is let it be known that they have “placed membership” with another congregation and shortly thereafter just quit attending, knowing the “sanctuary church” will do nothing.

Signs in front of our meeting places often include the inviting words, “Everyone Welcome.” It is true that we should *welcome everyone* to hear the word proclaimed, but this does not mean that we should *accept*

everyone into fellowship with us in our work for the Lord. When Saul of Tarsus tried to join the disciples in Jerusalem, the disciples rejected him until Barnabas vouched for him (Ac. 9:26-28). Later in life, as the apostle Paul, his reputation was such that he needed no “letters of commendation” as did some others (2 Cor. 3:1). These examples make it clear that the early church recognized the right of and need for a local congregation to decide who will be part of its fellowship.

Often when brethren move from one community to another, we already know of their faith and can accept them without any question; but when they are not known to us, we would do well to make certain they are true disciples and have the endorsement of faithful brethren from whence they came. We should especially be wary of those who leave a congregation near to where they live in favor of a church that is more distant lest we harbor ones who are avoiding responsibility or simply evading corrective discipline.

Anticipating An Objection

When the apostle Paul commanded brethren in Thessalonica to “withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly” (2 Thess. 3:6) he apparently was addressing an actual problem of some who were “not working at all” (v.12). Some who are resistant to withdrawing from those who are “out of duty” when it comes to worship will insist that this command does not apply. However, the command is to withdraw from *every* brother who walks disorderly—not just those who are “busybodies” as a result of not working. The apostle gave a wide-ranging command and applied it to a specific form of disorderly conduct. Think about it! Failing to work is no more “disorderly” than “forsaking the assembling of ourselves together” (Heb. 10:25).

The Knowledge of Good and Evil

By **ANDY DIESTELKAMP**

Was The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil an evil tree with evil fruit? This was the tree that was in the middle of the Garden of Eden and of which Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat. Was this tree evil? Before answering this question it would be appropriate to look at some other passages of Scripture that relate to the subjects of good and evil.

1 Kings 3:5-12 tells us of King Solomon's famous request for wisdom. Actually, the request was for the ability to discern between good and evil. This request was pleasing to God and He granted this ability to Solomon along with riches and power.

Hebrews 5:12-14 says that a spiritual infant is one who is only able to handle the milk of the word. In contrast, a spiritually mature person is able to handle the meat of God's word and is exercised in the discernment of good and evil.

In these two passages it is clear that the knowledge of good and evil is a sign of spiritual maturity. It is essentially a positive quality. So, why was God pleased with Solomon's request but angry at Adam and Eve's partaking of that knowledge?

Was the tree or its fruit inherently evil? No! God made them and God is not

Both articles on this page are reprints from past issues of THINK. The article above was written in 1995, and the article below was written in 1996.

the originator of evil. God declared His creation to be good and that included this tree (Gen. 1:31). God's reason why Adam and Eve were not permitted to touch or eat of this tree is not specifically given. "For in the day that you eat of it you will surely die" was not God's rationale for forbidding contact with this tree. It was God's warning of punishment if His command was ignored.

This prohibition, however, does not imply that the tree was evil. We err greatly if we assume that something that is forbidden is therefore inherently evil. Parents will forbid children to play in busy streets or to get anywhere near them. Are streets evil? We will tell small children, "Don't touch that stove," "Don't go in that yard," "Don't eat those cookies." Are stoves, yards and cookies evil? These things may be forbidden, but that doesn't mean that the objects themselves are evil.

Now, consider the approach of Satan as recorded in Genesis 3:1-7. Notice his presentation of God's words. "Indeed has God said, 'You shall not eat from every tree of the garden?'" At first glance this may appear to be a fair presentation of God's instructions, but notice the subtle shift in emphasis. God actually said, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat..." God's presentation of His instructions was positive with only one prohibition. Satan misquotes God and places emphasis upon the negative. This is still

an often used and persuasive tactic. Never mind all the advantages and blessings that come with obedience. What is usually emphasized by those in the temptation business is what is being deprived. Peers, for example, will say, "You mean your parents won't let you stay out past 8:00?!" The "friends," in an effort to modify the behavior of another, focus not on the loving, secure home that continuously provides for every need, but on the restriction. It is an attempt to distort perspective, and it is often very effective.

However, in the case of Eve, her first response to the tempter was good. She re-emphasized the positive statement of God while including the restriction and the punishment for failure to pay heed to this restriction. It is here that Satan not only misquotes God, but contradicts Him. "You surely shall not die!" To sweeten the temptation Satan exaggerates the benefits of eating the forbidden fruit. Yes, their eyes would be opened (vs.7)! Yes, they would be like God in their knowledge of good and evil (vs.22)! What Satan knew that he didn't tell them was that those "benefits" were not worth the sacrificing of their relationship with God for a relationship with him.

With his questions and statements Satan implied that God was unreasonably withholding something good from Adam and Eve. He implied that God's warning of death was just an idle threat or bluff to intimidate them. Eve could have said, "Get behind me, Satan. You are not mindful of the things of God." Instead she gave Satan's comments the weight of authority as she selfishly looked on the forbidden fruit. Deceit, lust, greed and vanity all played a part in the fall of mankind. Evil was not in the tree and it was not in the fruit or the knowledge that was obtained. Evil was in the simple act of disobedience to the will of God. The opinions of Satan were trusted more than the command of God. The desires of the flesh were valued more than the desires of God.

What we learn from Adam and Eve and the forbidden tree is that any rebellion to God or His ways is evil. It is evil no matter how it appears. It is evil no matter the good that we think will be accomplished. It is evil no matter the personal benefits we think that we'll obtain. Adam and Eve were presented with a choice. Daily we are presented with similar choices. Which will we choose: good or evil, God's way or some other?

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Do You Think There's Nothing in a Name?

By **AL DIESTELKAMP**

There has been considerable discussion among brethren concerning how local congregations identify themselves on signs and advertising. Should we stick with "church of Christ" or would it be wise to choose another scriptural description?

Most all agree, at least in principle, that there is no single description prescribed in God's word that we must use to the exclusion of all others. However, some get nervous when a congregation chooses to be identified in some other way.

I've heard some ask, "Would you be willing to erect a sign that says, 'This is not a Church of Christ?'" That's supposed to settle the matter. But that argument won't work. In return I would ask another

question: If you were to purchase an existing building that had a sign out front that read, "Church of God," would you take it down? You would, and so would I! Why? Not because it fails the scriptural test, but because we don't want to be identified with the denomination using that name. They have spoiled a perfectly good description.

A number of years ago there was a diet product on the market called *Ayds*. When scientists decided to name a fatal sexually-transmitted disease AIDS, despite the difference in spelling, the company felt it was in their best interest to choose a different name for their product.

Likewise, in some communities where digressive brethren and sectarians use and abuse the name "Church of Christ" faithful brethren may be motivated to use another scriptural description.

BEING A COMPANION

By STEVE FONTENOT

Man had a problem: *loneliness*. Therefore, man had a need: *suitable* (“meet” KJV) *company* (the opposite of being alone). One who accompanies is a “*companion*.” “Companion” is from Latin, *panis*, bread and *com*, with. “To eat bread with.”

That’s about all the “companionship” some know in a marriage. There’s no sharing of feelings, goals, dreams, sorrows, tears, heartaches. They do little together, except eat together and have kids together—and they may fuss together occasionally. Maybe they will spend a week or two together a year on a vacation. But day-to-day they live in separate corridors. They pass and say, “hello,” but often one does not really know how the other feels, for they do not share feelings each another. Sometimes other people know their mates better than they do. Sad isn’t it...? It’s not what God intended.

It takes *trust* to be a good companion—*trust* that your companion will keep confidentiality, that they have some sense of judgment, that they really care about you. *Trust*—you can’t buy it, you can’t demand it, but you can *earn* it (or *destroy* it). It must be sad (and lonely) to have a “companion” you don’t feel you can trust. And it must be sad (and lonely) to have a “companion” you believe doesn’t trust you. Sad, but it could be so much better.

Mutual respect is a requisite for a healthy relationship between companions. When a man “honors” his wife, and a woman “respects” her husband, they are much more inclined to share not only their bread and bed, but their dreams, fears, aspirations, sorrows, goals, disappointments... *their lives*.

Then there is *love* (1 Cor. 13:4f). You enjoy being with someone who is patient and kind. “*Love* is patient, *love* is kind.”

Love “is not jealous” of the other’s freedoms, schedules, abilities, and accomplishments. Of course, *love*, not being filled with an overestimation of one’s importance or accomplishments, “does not brag” about one’s freedoms, abilities, or accomplishments.

Love “is not rude” and therefore does not unnecessarily embarrass a companion before others. That may make one feel important, or vindicated, or gather attention, but *love* “does not seek its own.”

It’s not inviting to share too much, whether time or heart, with someone who gets upset easily or keeps dragging up the

“Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.’” (Gen. 2:18, NASB).

past. But *love* “is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.”

Being a good companion may try you at times. You’ve got to put up with some things, give the benefit of the doubt, hope for the best, and be willing to stick with your mate through the bad times as well as the good. Indeed, *love* “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

“*Love*,” not *luv*! Maybe that’s what God

intended to mold and regulate this relationship when He made it and pronounced it, “very good.” Sadly, some have forgotten how to love. Some never learned. Some never will. Of course, it doesn’t have to be that way. We could *learn* to love.

“*It is not good for the man to be alone.*” It wasn’t then. It isn’t now. It’s not good for the one who is supposed to be the companion to be lonely either. But, it happens. It happens all over this world. We should know better. We, God’s people, could do better. Will we?

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Un-Amazing Grace

By DAVID DIESTELKAMP

Yes, yes, the grace of God is amazing—and beyond amazing! The way He loves us, forgives us, serves us, came and died for us—inexpressible, amazing grace!

God’s grace is amazing because of its “exceeding riches” (Eph. 2:7), but it is also amazing because it is rare. “For scarcely or a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:7-8). But should it be so rare?

Most human grace is un-amazing. “...if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same” (Lk. 6:32-33). People don’t experience amazing grace, but we’re different. We revel in the amazing grace of God, desperately needing it, continually praising Him for it, but then are content to extend un-amazing personal grace to others. We love others like the world does—loving the loveable. We love those who love us, who benefit us, who reciprocate. There’s certainly nothing amazing about that.

Think of Christ’s love challenge: “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn. 15:12). Every amazing facet of the love of God that we discover is to inspire amazing love in ourselves toward others. Toward all others! Don’t be content with un-amazing love in

any situation. In fact, in unloving situations—when others are unlovable and the world wouldn’t love them—we have the best opportunities to show the amazing grace of God that is in us.

Are we content with un-amazing grace in the area of forgiveness? It requires amazing forgiveness from God to satisfy our desperate spiritual needs. What do we do with Ephesians 4:32 which says we are to be “...forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you”? Is our forgiveness of others amazing or un-amazing grace? How can we require amazing grace for our unforgiveables, then extend un-amazing grace that only forgives forgiveables? Isn’t it in unforgiveable situations that we have the best opportunities to show the amazing grace of God that is in us?

After Jesus’ amazing act of humble service in washing the disciple’s feet He concluded: “...I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you” (Jn. 13:15). All service toward God and others should be amazing acts of humble sacrifice. Jesus was not satisfied with un-amazing grace in anything He did. It’s not about the other’s worthiness, deserving, what they do for us, or what they will do with what we give them. None in those motivations are amazing. None of those motivations were involved in God’s amazing grace to us. It’s time for us to show the world that Christ is different – He’s amazing, and He’s in us.

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus...” (Phil. 2:5).

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*"I feel that I am right
in my belief"*

By **STEVE FONTENOT**

So did Saul when he locked up Christians in prison and gave consent to their death (Ac. 26:9-10). So does the Muslim, the Hindu, the Mormon, the Roman Catholic, the Baptist, the Methodist, the Presbyterian...the idolater, the Christian, the Jew. What does this prove? They *feel* (subjective) they are right, not that they *are* right. In fact, they can't *all* be right!

Is there no objective (external) standard of "right" by which feelings can be measured? Indeed there is—the written word of God—the Bible, correctly interpreted and applied. This is what Jesus pointed a man to when he asked the most important question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus did not respond, "How do you *feel*?" or "What's in your heart?" He said, "*What is written in the law? How does it read to you?*" (Lk. 10:25,26).

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Faith in God's Promises Tested Over Time

By **ANDY DIESTELKAMP**

We tend to be very time oriented, whereas God is not so. He created time (cf. Gen. 1:14), but He is not bound by it, for "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8). Our earthly lifespans are relatively short. They are virtually nothing when compared to God's eternal existence (cf. Psa. 90:1-12; Jas. 4:14). Thus, we have very limited time to live by faith.

The time between the first specific promise to Abraham that he would have a son of his "own body" (Gen. 15:4) and its fulfillment in the birth of Isaac (21:5) was about fifteen years. It had been 25 years since Abraham left his homeland (12:4). That's a long time for *anybody*, let alone senior citizens, to wait for the birth of a child!

The faith of Abraham and Sarah was tested during this prolonged time. Sometimes it failed; but, overall, it sustained them. On one occasion, before their promised child was born, they were visited by "three men" (18:2) to whom they showed respectful hospitality (18:3-8; cf. Heb. 13:1). When these strangers questioned Abraham about

his wife by name, it likely piqued not only his interest but Sarah's curiosity as well. As she covertly listened through the tent door, she heard the announcement that she would "have a son" (Gen. 18:9,10). Upon hearing the message, "Sarah laughed within herself" with incredulity (v. 12). Yet imagine the embarrassment felt when Sarah's unbelief was called out with the rhetorical "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (v. 14). In a typical reaction, Sarah denied laughing but had to reveal her eavesdropping to do so, only to be told, "No, but you did laugh!" (v. 15).

Surely we can all relate to Sarah's disbelief. We claim to be people of faith, but often when our faith is tested, we laugh at the thought that God could or would do what He has promised. We *know* that nothing is too hard for God, but we do not always live and talk like that is true. We give up on God. Thankfully, He is gracious and does not give up on us, just as He did not give up on Sarah. "If we are faithless, He remains faithful" (2 Tim. 2:13).

Sarah is not remembered by God for her laughing. Notice how God remembers her. "By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a

child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised" (Heb. 11:11). We may not pass every test of our faith, but if we will repent and learn from our failures that God is faithful, He will graciously remember *our* sins no more (e.g. Jer. 31:34). May we have the humility to acknowledge Jesus as our Savior and say, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" (Mk. 9:24).

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